

# “Do Your Ears Itch?”

## 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

October 20, 2013

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Most people want success in whatever endeavor they wish to undertake. In fact, I can't think of anyone who wants to not succeed when he or she does something. But how does one measure success? I think there are several ways.

First, we want some high measurable numbers (unless your goal is to play good golf). If you want success in school, you want high grades – a 100% if possible. If you want success in business, then you want high profits – big bucks. If you want success in sports you want a lot of victories and championships.

Secondly, we want to feel good about what we are doing. To be successful, we want to feel a certain amount of pride, satisfaction, and accomplishment. Athletes want to feel proud of their record. Workers want to feel satisfaction in a job well done. Students want to feel a sense of accomplishment as they pass their courses, join the National Honor Society, and get big scholarships to prestigious universities.

Thirdly, we want others to like us and appreciate us as well. To be successful means that both people within our field of pursuit and, especially, people outside of our field of pursuit recognize our success, respect it, and, hopefully, want to become part of it.

There is nothing wrong with success in the various activities in this world. There is nothing wrong with the criteria by which we measure success in these areas. A problem develops when this definition of success and these criteria by which we measure success are brought into the church.

Many today, both inside the church and outside the church, measure success in the church by the same criteria. We look for high numbers – how many are in attendance, how many worship on a Sunday morning, how much money is being put in the offering plates. The church that has lots of these things is deemed successful. Those who do not are deemed unsuccessful.

We want to feel good about ourselves in what our church believes, teaches, confesses, and does. If we feel good, then we are a successful church. If we feel embarrassed, we are an unsuccessful church.

We want others to agree with us or, at least, to like us. We want to make sure that members are always satisfied with what our church believes, teaches, confesses, and does. We want those outside the church to be attracted by what our church believes, teaches, confesses, and does. If everyone is happy and lots of people are joining the church, then we have a successful church. If people leave the church or if not enough people are coming into the church, then we are an unsuccessful church.

What is happening today – not only in Peace Lutheran Church or in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod – but in many Christian churches throughout our country and the world? There are declining numbers, both in worship attendance and in membership. Christians, when confronted by the doctrines and morals of society, get a little hesitant about their doctrine and practice. It seems to me that there are many people who are almost embarrassed to be Lutheran today in doctrine and practice. People are leaving the church. Other people are not joining the church. Often times, it is because they do not believe what our church teaches, confesses, and does.

A panic mode often ensues. There is a “save the institution” attitude that prevails. Do whatever it takes to get more people in the pews and more bucks in the offering plates. Readjust our teaching and practice with the times so that we fit in better with our culture. Make people happy so that members will stay and new people will join.

But is this how Scripture sees success in the church? Perhaps St. Paul can shed some light on this matter. Wouldn't he be a reliable source on what we, as a church, should do? Wouldn't he be an expert on what we should believe, teach, and confess? After all, he wrote over half the New Testament and founded several churches. He just might have some expertise in this area.

The problem is that Paul is not successful as the world measures success. Although he has preached the Gospel and established congregations all throughout Asia Minor, at the time of the text,

he finds himself sitting in jail, all alone (except for his friend Luke), waiting to be executed for being a preacher of Jesus Christ. No mega-church minister is he.

He doesn't have much tangible results to brag about. Just prior to the text, he recounts how he was constantly being persecuted for preaching the truth in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. He was opposed by the Jews, hauled before Roman courts, and stoned by the enemies of the Gospel.

Prospects for improvement (as the world measures improvement), either inside the church or outside the church, were not any better than they are today. Of those outside the church, Paul writes in the previous chapter,

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”  
(2 Timothy 3:1-5)

Of those inside the church, Paul writes in our text, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”

Both of these descriptions sound a lot like today. They are supposed to. Paul says he is not just writing about his present situation. He is writing about the future. Well, the future is now. The immorality described by Paul is common place. Some of it is accepted in modern day society, even celebrated. The desire for new and different doctrines is common place and celebrated as well.

“Pure doctrine” is a dirty word among some people within the church. Sound teaching is not only not being endured by people and churches, but those hold to it with regard to such basic Biblical doctrines as sin, the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone, the power of baptism, the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper are often being rejected, even persecuted, sometimes even within their own congregation or church body. And then there are Biblical teachings about social issues such as abortion, suicide, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, euthanasia. Church members and preachers that hold to the Biblical view and proclaim it in the public square are often ridiculed, harassed, and, in some situations, even jailed. People have itching ears. They don't want to hear

about what the Bible says. They want to make the Bible say what they want it to. And they can always find teachers who will tell them what they want to hear.

If you are looking for a spectacular solution by St. Paul to turn this around and make it a worldly success and a happy situation, don't hold your breath. In the verses just prior to our text, Paul writes, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Hear that again: "*all* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Persecution in some sense is unavoidable for faithful Christians.

Yet the solution Paul gives is to continue what we have been doing. The words to faithful Timothy, as pastor, apply to faithful pastors and faithful Christians today. After saying immediately before our text, "evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived," Paul says to Pastor Timothy, to me, to you, and to all Christians,

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

Many of us, like Timothy, have been taught the Holy Scriptures from the time we were little children. We have believed the Scriptures without question. Paul says to continue in what we have learned and firmly believed. Why? The Bible is not a man-made text of religious rules for right living like many other sacred texts. The Holy Scriptures are "breathed out by God". They are from the very mouth of God. The Scriptures are reliable and profitable, not because they bring us religion, rituals, or right living. The Bible and the doctrines contained within it bring us Jesus Christ. It is not Jesus, the righteous rabbi; Jesus, the miracle worker, or Jesus, the good buddy. The Scriptures bring us Jesus, bloodied and dead on a cross with our sin upon Him. The Scriptures bring us Jesus, alive and glorified with new life for all. The Scriptures bring us Jesus' forgiveness, Jesus' new life, Jesus' deliverance from the evil of this world, and Jesus' eternal kingdom in heaven.

Other behavior and beliefs bring short term pleasure and gain, but long term damnation in hell. Despite the persecution and the pain of being faithful in our belief, our teaching, our confession, and

our action, we have short term suffering and long term life in heaven. During the interim, Jesus gives us “that peace which the world cannot give”, as the familiar prayer says; “the peace that passes all human understanding.”

For those who have itching ears and want to find teachers to tell them what they want to hear, we are, by no means, to change our message to accommodate them. Paul says to Timothy – in fact he does more than say, he solemnly charges him in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

These words for Timothy are for us, as well. Do not change the message because the culture has changed its message. Preach the Word of God. Proclaim the Word of God in all of its truth and purity “in season” when it is heard and welcomed, but also “out of season”, when it is ignored and persecuted. Declare the Word of God whether it is heard or not, liked or not, accepted or not, or believed or not. Do not be afraid of the truth of God’s Word, but call sin, sin; rebuke those who practice it, and encourage those who are struggling in sin and despondent with guilt with the proclamation of forgiveness for that sin through the death of Jesus Christ and a new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Be patient with those who struggle. Teach those who are ignorant. Never give up.

This is not an excuse for a poor effort or a lack of effort in doing ministry, nor is it advocating doing ministry according to the old Lutheran adage, ‘we’ve always done it that way before.’ We are not blind slaves to tradition. We do have some freedom in developing new ways of proclaiming the message, but we do not have the freedom to change the message. We can develop new ways of expressing our beliefs but we cannot develop new beliefs. “Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed” from the God-breathed Holy Scriptures. Pray for me and for our congregation that we preach the Word of God faithfully and completely, in times when it is accepted and especially in times when it is rejected. Pray for yourselves that your ears may not itch so that you are tempted to leave the truth and follow myths, no matter how tempting they might be. Hear the Word of God.

Learn the Word of God. Remember the Word of God. You, I, and our church will survive and thrive, maybe not in the way the world expects, but in the way that God desires and promises. Amen.